



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees*

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ **W**elcome to the **Frontline Supervisor!** The Department of Personnel **Employee Advisory Service** is providing this newsletter to Washington State Supervisors as a forum to share ideas and clarification about the issues that you deal with on a day-to-day basis. It is based on questions asked by supervisors around the U.S.

■ Q. If supervisors are not supposed to diagnose alcohol- or drug-addicted employees, why are signs and symptoms of an employee with a possible alcohol or other drug problem, like alcohol on the breath, included in supervisor training?

■ Q. My employee and I differ on how he should be doing his job. We've known each other a long time, but recently seem to be in continual conflict. Would it be a good idea to ask EAS to mediate our conflict with each other?

The **Frontline Supervisor** is a new service being provided by the **Employee Advisory Service**. We are sponsoring this newsletter in order to provide you easy access to information that addresses concerns shared by supervisors. It is being passed on by your agency or institution because they share our belief that the information, support and encouragement offered here can lead to effective and consistent supervisory actions. We trust that this publication will remind you that the Employee Advisory Service is here for your support and to assist with the difficult employee issues that confront you. Future editions will address supervisory issues from across the country. We also welcome your specific questions. Call your regional EAS office (listed above). If desired you can print and save these newsletters.

A. Supervisors are provided with common performance-related signs and symptoms that could be associated with many personal problems. The more comprehensive the list of performance problems, the better. Clinical symptoms that professionals use to diagnose chemical dependency are not provided to supervisors. Some performance symptoms may be more common among employees with alcohol or other drug problems, but are not diagnostic. Alcohol on the breath may be a performance issue upon which to base a supervisor referral, but it alone has little diagnostic value. Training supervisors helps them avoid natural inclinations to focus on images, myths, or stereotypes of addicted persons. When this shift is made to focusing on job performance problems, more employees who have alcohol or other drug dependencies get referred.

A. You should examine the nature of your conflict with your employee before engaging in a mediation process. Some supervisors feel hesitant about asserting themselves with employees they know well because it feels awkward and antagonistic to their long-term and familiar relationship. They would like to avoid feeling as though they are "pulling rank." They are unaware that their employee's behavior has placed them in this position, so they struggle with a way to get the job done without upsetting their employee. You have a right to expect work duties to be performed in ways you judge effective. Although mediation is useful in workplace relationships, the natural imbalance of power between the supervisor and the employee can be harmed by mediation. This could send a message that makes changes optional for the supervised employee. Work with your EAS Professional to understand your role, this relationship, and the most appropriate options for resolving conflict. You may decide that mediation is not appropriate.



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■ Q. I just referred my employee with performance problems to EAS for the third time this year. I'm discouraged with EAS because this employee's performance hasn't changed for good. What is the value of this process?

A. Not all employees will perform satisfactorily after referral to EAS. Some reject EAS recommendations outright, some bounce back 100 percent, and others try but fail to manage a personal problem successfully. All employees, however, must own their outcome of working with EAS and the quality of their performance. You may be frustrated by the irregular work pace your employee displays, where months of satisfactory performance separate performance problems. If you do not act in the best interest of the organization, you will enable your employee to avoid feeling accountable for satisfactory performance. The pattern you describe will therefore continue. Your employee is not performing in a satisfactory manner, so you must decide what to do about it. Be careful not to see the Employee Advisory Service as a safe harbor for your employee or as responsible for the quality of his performance.

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■ Q. Our work division is plagued by rumors. It's been this way for years. What makes rumors worse among some organizations than others? What can managers do to reduce their occurrence?

A. Rumors are unsubstantiated information of uncertain origin spread usually by word of mouth. Frequent rumors give you a clue that there is a need to improve communication within the workplace or tackle problems that affect morale. Problems in each of these areas usually feed the development of rumors. Communication flows more slowly, but accurately downward through management levels, but more rapidly and inaccurately in a horizontal direction. Very large groups of employees with the same pay grade, rank, or status who report to one leader or management team (a flat organization structure) may experience more problems with rumors. Communicate with employees in a flat organization more frequently, particularly at stressful times, and you will intervene in the rumor mill more effectively. Increase morale by identifying needs of employees, finding ways for them to control and influence their work, and applying policies and work rules fairly and consistently.

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## NOTES:

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